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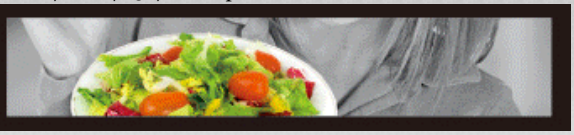

Anthropocene

by nickland @ Thursday, 09 June 2011 15:45

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Human history is geology on speed

Complex systems, characterized by high (and rising local) negative entropy, are essentially historical. The sciences devoted to them tend inevitably to become evolutionary, as exemplified by the course of the earth- and life-sciences – which had become thoroughly historicized by the late 19th century. Perhaps the most elegant, abstract, or 'cosmic' comprehension of this necessity is found in the work of Vladimir Ivanovich Vernadsky (1863-1945), whose visionary writings sought to establish the basis for an integrated understanding of terrestrial history, conceived as a process of material acceleration through geochemical epochs.

Despite the philosophical power of his ideas, Vernadsky's scientific training as a chemist anchored his thoughts in concrete, literal reality. The acceleration of the terrestrial process was more than an anthropocentric impression, registering socially and culturally significant change (such as the cephalization of the primate lineage leading to mankind). Geochemical evolution was physically expressed through the average velocity of particles, as biological metabolism (biosphere), and eventually human cultures (noosphere), introduced and propagated ever more intense networks of chemical reactions. Life is matter in a hurry, culture even more so.

Whilst Vernadsky has been sporadically rediscovered and celebrated, his importance – based on the profundity, rigor, and supreme relevance of his work -- has yet to be fully and universally acknowledged. Yet it is possible that his time is finally arriving.

The May 28 – June 3 edition of *The Economist* devotes an editorial and major feature story to the Anthropocene – a distinctive geological epoch proposed by Paul Crutzen in 2000, now under consideration by the International Commission on Stratigraphy (the "ultimate adjudicator of the geological time scale"). Recognition of the Anthropocene would be an acknowledgement that we inhabit a geological epoch whose physical signature has been fundamentally re-shaped by the technological forces of the 'noosphere' or 'ethosphere' – in which human intelligence has been introduced as a massive (and even dominant) force of nature. Radical metamorphosis (and acceleration) of the earth's nitrogen and carbon cycles are especially pronounced Anthropocene signals.

"The term 'paradigm shift' is bandied around with promiscuous ease," *The Economist* notes. "But for the natural sciences to make human activity central to its conception of the world,

rather than a distraction, would mark such a shift for real."

Third Reich master architect Albert Speer is notorious for his promotion of 'ruin value' – the persist constructions, encountered by archaeologists in the far future. The Anthropocene introduces a sim vaster scale. As *The Economist* remarks:

The most common way of distinguishing periods of geological time is by means of the fossils they c out the Anthropocene in the rocks of days to come will be pretty easy. Cities will make particularly fast-sinking river delta (and fast-sinking deltas, undermined by the pumping of groundwater and s upstream, are common Anthropocene environments) could spend millions of years buried and still, reveal through its crushed structures and weird mixtures of materials that it is unlike anything els

As terrestrial history accelerates, the distinctive units of geological time are compressed. The Arche measured in billions of years, the Palaeozoic and Mesozoic *eras* in hundreds of millions, the Palaeo tens of millions. The Holocene *epoch* lasts less than 10,000 years, and the Anthropocene (*epoch* or because its recognition is already an indication of its end.

Beyond the Anthropocene lies the Technocene, distinguished by nanotechnological manipulation of revolution of such magnitude that only the assembly of (RNA and DNA) replicator molecules is com the coming Technocene (lasting mere decades?), the carbon cycle is relayed through sub-microscop that utilize it as the ultimate industrial resource – feedstock for diamondoid nanomachine fabricati geological deposition, and thus for the discoveries of potential distant-future geologists, are substa side of nanomachined age, femtomachines await, precisely assembled from quarks, and decompos physics.

For the moment, however, even the origination of the Anthropocene – never mind its termination – controversy. Assuming that it coincides with industrialization (which is not universally accepted), geo enmeshed in a debate among historians, as the fraught term 'modernity' takes on a geochemical d outcome, Vernadsky is back.

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